New Fiction in Varied Forms

JOANNA GODDEN. By Sheila Kaye-Smith. E. P. Dutton & Co.

THERE are writers who are like a tree—an oak deep-rooted in its soil, drawing from it all the life and sustenance and beauty it requires for its noble spread of boughs and green canopy of leaves. Here is no need of wandering, no necessity to seek strange men and customs. Here is the heart of life, and it is enough.

Sheila Kaye-Smith is such a writer, and the books she gives us are sound and fine, fit fruit to spring from steadfast growth. They have the breath of the land in them, the truth of a life deeply felt and intimately known, the beauty that is born of such a source. Her men and women are true creations of the imagination, living an actual life within the scope of the story, and going on into your own life, to become a part of your experience. She is a remarkable writer and the five books to her credit are a distinct addition to the novels of our generation. This latest of the number, "Joanna Godden," is the best where all are good. As the author goes on in her art she loses a certain stiffness of style and she plunges more deeply into the human heart, while her humor grows more luminous, shining through the whole work as a veiled lamp glows softly in a room, illuminating everything but not sharply defined in any one spot. There is a ripeness about "Joanna Godden" which the earlier books have not quite attained.

The story is of a woman's middle years, from twenty-odd to near forty, and of the farm she owns and manages and the folk round about it. It tells of her first love and its tragic outcome. It tells of her last love and what came of that. And in the telling of these it puts before you a whole community, a countryside and method of life and manner of thought.

You grow to love Joanna deeply before the story ends. She is a creature full of faults, quick tempered, rather bumptious, sure of herself, overbearing in getting her own way. She irritates you enormously at times, you know that she could enrage you. But you would love her through it all. Martin Trevor, thinking her over, beginning to like her, told himself that she was "good, common stuff. She was like some sterling homespun piece, strong and sweet smelling—she was like a plot of the marsh earth, soft and rich and alive. He had forgotten her barbaric tendency, the eccentricity of looks and conduct which had at first repelled him—that aspect had melted in the unsuspected warmth and softness he had found in her. He had been mistaken as to her sexlessness—she was alive all through. She was still far removed from his type, but her fundamental simplicity had brought her nearer to it. . . ."

Tall was Joanna and strong, with a golden warm glow to her, color in her cheeks and warm blue eyes. When her father died—and it is his funeral we meet as we open the book—she decided that she would herself carry on the farm he had left her, one of the finest in the flat marsh country, Little Ansdore, with 300 acres of pasture dappled over with big Kent sheep. Great indeed is the disapproval of the neighbors. No woman's work was this, and the prophecies of disaster were frequent and hopeful. She'd be forever meddling with the strange notions she had, and what man would work for her?

Meddle she does, and fight she does, and fail she does not. She makes her mistakes. And they are the mistakes of a woman. She keeps on a "looker," as they call the shepherd in the marsh country, because he "was dark and sweet of face and limb," though an ignorant, inefficient servant who had brought her great losses, in defiance to all she is told, all she secretly realizes; yet when the moment comes that opens her eyes wide to her foolishness she learns her lesson and abides by it. She weeps over it, but she does not shirk it. Honest as the white sunlight of noon is Joanna, and as good to live with. Her willfulness has been the cause of the death of many of her ewes, it brings the farm into difficulties and mars her credit. She does not mince matters in acknowledging it, nor does she lose her courage. And in two years Little Ansdore is prosperous again, two years of hard work but not of complaining.

Gradually Joanna wins the grudged admiration of her farmer neighbors. They are ready enough to comment upon her peculiarities, but they are not blind to the skill and hard work that have brought the farm back again. She is admitted to the Farmers' Dinner and they talk with her as equal to equal.

It is at this time that Joanna meets her first love and becomes engaged. She had the wish to marry, but she did not want to marry dully. Either above her or below her, where romance could march alongside, she would mate, but not with one of her own kind. For years Arthur Alce has wanted her, patiently wooing, and for years she has remained indifferent, though the neighborhood has had them married these dozens of times. And now comes a man whom she can love, with whom she can realize all the natural half felt yearning in her for a full and happy life. This period in Joanna's life is told with a rarely beautiful sympathy. Martin loves her and finds all the great, sweet kindness in her, adores her just as she is, without missing the incongruities and differences between them, without closing his eyes to the fact that she is a "managing woman" and that abstractly he dislikes a managing woman. As for Joanna, her love has changed her—"something in her was broken, melted, changed out of all recognition—she was softer, weaker, more excited, more tender. She had lost much of her old swagger, her old cocksureness, for Martin had utterly surprised and tamed her. She had come to him in a scheming spirit of politics, and he had kept her in a spirit of devotion. She had come to him as Ansdore to North Farthing—but he had stripped her of Ansdore, and she was just Joanna Godden, who had waited twenty-eight years for love."

But Joanna's happiness is snapped short off, and she is once more left alone. Alone except for the little sister, whom she tyrannizes over and loves, and for whom she has always hoped great things. She shall be a lady. When Joanna's ship foundered, leaving her clinging to Little Ansdore as to a place of wreckage, Ellen was away at the school her sister had found for her, a school where the daughters of the high-born went to be educated, and where Ellen was trained in ways alien enough from the farm home. Gradually Joanna emerges from her suffering, and the checked current of her love turns to Ellen, whose homecoming is due, and whom she plans to make happy with a new bedroom whose adorning is altogether in Joanna's taste and not at all in Ellen's.

Of course Ellen has little admiration for either her sister or the life of Little Ansdore. The situation is ended for the moment by her marriage to the faithful Arthur Alce, who in order to please the woman he loves, marries the sister he admires, but does not love.

The last portion of Joanna's story brings a development that is natural enough, but that sweeps away from her everything she had left. It takes Ellen, who was gone already so far as anything worth the having was concerned, but it also takes the farm. The last love was a cheated love, as the first was a lost one. Joanna marries neither the true nor the false man. But Joanna remains unconquered, and as we see her at the end we love her better than ever. In her heart is the thought of Martin, whose wife she should have been, though under her heart is another man's child. . . .

"There she stood, nearly forty years old, on the threshhold of an entirely new life—her lover, her sister, her farm, her home, her good name, all lost. But the past and the future still were hers."

We can but guess what Joanna will make of this new life. But life has made something wonderfully fine out of Joanna, though it has taken so much away.

HILDEGARDE HAWTHORNE

SILVER CROSS. By Mary Johnston. Little, Brown & Co.

MARY JOHNSTON may indeed be counted among those writers who practice a commendable literary birth control. Almost twenty-five years have passed since she first began to publish and yet the list of her full length novels is not overlong. She does not write unless she has something to say . . . a custom not as common among the craft as some might think. She has a great deal to say in this newest novel, and she says it exceedingly well. Two of Mary Johnston's good qualities as a writer are present in this book in full measure; her ability to call up a past age and make the figures from that time living, breathing human beings, and her power to make the big central ethical theme, behind the story, real and living also.

"Silver Cross" pictures the England of the reign of Henry the VII. But we have no dealings with kings and courts. It is with the church of that time, with the great abbeys and monasteries, their jealousies and intrigues, their power and their unscrupulousness, that the action has to do. And the two destinies which come in time to focus sympathy on themselves are those of simple folk, a goldsmith and a Magdalen. Rich burghers and a simple knight or two, and the scores of other folk are there, and many abbots, priors, and monks. Frankly and honestly are the intrigues and falseness of the church of that time dealt with, and yet the books pulses with a deeply religious feeling.

There is something extremely modern and familiar seeming to those who can be as honest about these days, in the jealousies of the two big abbeys, Silver Cross and Saint Leofrics, and their manner of advertising themselves and "selling salvation." They are near enough to one another in situation for one to suffer if the other has some great attraction in the way of a relic, working miracles, to offer. When Saint Leofric's could show a miraculously found arm and hand of their patron saint, and the simple trusting folk—of which there were apparently as many in those days as now—come and by reason of their belief are healed, Abbot Mark of the rich Silver Cross is sadly upset. He sees his house's popularity and riches melting away. Lord Montjoy, the patron of Silver Cross, honestly religious and loving the great church because it holds the mortal remains of the wife of his youth, he also is deeply concerned. And when by chance it is possible for Abbot Mark and Prior Matthew of Westforest, a daughter house of Silver Cross, to prove that the miraculous hand and arms bones were stolen from an ordinary graveyard in dead of night, and are nothing but fraud, cleverly advertised as truth, Montjoy is deeply concerned for the simple faith of the countryside. But Abbot Mark and Prior Matthew know that the honest hearted lord would be still more horrified if they suggested that Silver Cross might also "find" some Wonder and draw the crowds to itself.

But they do arrange a counter attraction, slyly, diabolically, cleverly, using for their instrument the person of Brother Richard, once a successful goldsmith, but driven, in his later thirties, into the church by pressure of personal doubts and suffering and by a sincere and earnest groping for the truth. By slow and cunning processes, similar indeed to those by which governments sell "holy wars" to their unsuspecting people, Brother Richard is made to see a Vision. The great altar picture at Silver Cross, the beautiful Madonna whom he loves with an odd worship combined of the mystic and the human, comes

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